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Jason Ohler's Digital Community: Digital Citizen

Review by Richard Tinsen and Michael Charles

Digital Community: Digital Citizen takes the reader down a three-part path to digital citizenry. First is a description of how digital citizenship fits within the evolution of citizenship and community; second is a discussion of learning to see technology and its impact on our society, and third is a practical discussion of how to create a good digital community through good citizenry. The 12 chapters are easy to read, well organized, and include a rare combination of “big picture” perspectives and practical classroom applications.

Part I contains some of the best parts of the book as Ohler presents his ideas in an historical context. For example, in Chapter Two, Ohler gives “An extremely short history of civilization”¹ that traces evolution of the modern state starting with the Greek city-states. This leads to an insight into the challenges of citizenship independent of the influence of technology and shows citizenship as a concept that has been evolving for over 2000 years. It is fundamental to the concept of citizenship that it has, and will, continue to evolve.

His first and third points are particularly germane to the educator; citizenship requires individual virtuous behavior, and it requires education. The importance of virtuous behavior is addressed again in Part Three of the book, but it is a critical aspect of the social obligation of the educator. The second important concept described in Part I is the inseparable connection between citizenship and community.

Ohler's concept of community is similar to the anthropological description of culture and shares the same attributes. As a culture we have both the introspective challenge to define who we are as well as a contemplative requirement to define who we want to be. We need to understand both the current and desired behaviors of our community as a prelude to defining and teaching “virtuous behavior”.

¹ Jason Ohler, “An Extremely Short History of Citizenship” in *Digital Community: Digital Citizen* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2010), 28-36.

The theme of Part II is that “in order to help students become effective digital citizens, we must help them see technology that is largely invisible to them”.² Ohler points out that this is exactly the opposite of the advice given by most in the field of educational technology, who believe that the technology needs to become less visible as the focus turns to enabling better learning of the use of technology. But as a student of Marshal McLuhan, Ohler has a sharp eye for the ways that technology impacts our lives, both positively and negatively, and he believes that students need to be “actively engaged in deconstructing technology and making connections between what it does and how it connects us”.³ His recommendations are very much in line with the National Educational Technology Standard 5: “Students understand human, cultural, and societal issues related to technology and practice legal and ethical behavior”.⁴ But his recommendations that technology be an object of study itself may strike many practicing educators as laudable, but undoable, given the current crowded nature of the curriculum. He says more about this issue in Part III.

In Part III, Ohler returns to the issues of values. He even admits surprise that the “my journey would ultimately bring me to the topic of character education. Yet in hindsight, it seems inevitable.”⁵ He considers several different abhorrent behaviors that are current issues in discussions of the Internet. They run from cyberbullying to factition (a person who distorts fact and fiction for the betterment of their own personal agenda) but his most pertinent observation is that we are responding to these issues individually. He concludes that “We need a whole-school approach to behavior that sets the entirety of being digitally active within an overall ethical and behavior context-character education for the digital age.”⁶

An ideal school board is created as a context for addressing the five agenda items that are identified as necessary for creating an environment nurturing to good digital citizenship.

The first agenda item is helping teachers understand their own core ethics. Ohler recognizes the potential minefield that teachers would encounter, but the school board will wholeheartedly support the teacher in this new role (remember this is an *ideal* school board). The role of teacher as an ethical coach is introduced with an admonishment to “understand our own ethical cores”.

² Ohler, *Digital Community*, 108.

³ Ohler, *Digital Community*, 91.

⁴ “NETS for Students 2007”, International Society for Technology in Education, accessed January 5, 2011, <http://www.iste.org/standards/nets-for-students/nets-student-standards-2007.aspx>

⁵ Ohler, *Digital Community*, 139.

⁶ Ohler, *Digital Community*, 145.

Ohler's use of the term "ethical cores" seems redundant and confusing. Ohler himself recognizes the common confusion between morality, ethics, and values; he even dedicates a sidebar ⁷ to his own definition, but he does not seem to consistently use the terms. Later, in chapter 10, additional terms "core ethical values and supportive performance values" are added without explanation. Perhaps consistent usage of the term *ethics* as being non-temporal and collective would have clarified his message of digital citizenry being a modern application in which we need to define a moral framework.

The second agenda item is to take "A crash course in kids". This will help us to understand the difference in the digital community from the real life community and also to better understand childhood brain research and how that impacts moral development. The teacher uses the newly discovered ethical compass to teach the students a moral roadmap. Students can be involved in this process by taking responsibility for how technology is used and maintained in their own schools. For example, students involved in projects such as Gen-Yes are asked to solve technical problems *and* provide their own perspectives on issues of digital citizenship. ⁸

Moral development inevitably leads to the need for character education in agenda item three. "The Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education" ⁹ are presented and modified with a digital age focus. Principle 5 in that list can be updated with a digital focus (listed in *italics*): The schools sets clear expectations for students to engage in moral action in terms of civility, personal responsibility, good sportsmanship, helping others, and service to school and community *within local, global, and digital communities*. ¹⁰

The fourth item on the agenda addresses important issues on supporting the goals of the first three. Literacy has long been understood as a requirement in an effective Democracy. We need to expand our understanding of literacy to include the demands of the new media. There are many more avenues in the digital world and some are less safe than others. Ohler points out that we must "develop literacy not just with digital tools but also about digital tools". The skills to open a browser are analogous to the skills to open a book. The real value in each is the ability to understand content and evaluate the accuracy. Even more important is that we move students past literacy and into fluency in areas such as solution development, information use, creativity and others. ¹¹

⁷ Ohler, *Digital Community*, 157.

⁸ "GenYES - Student Powered Technology Integration", Generation YES Corporation, Accessed January 3, 2011 from <http://genyes.org/programs/genyes>

⁹ "11 Principles of Effective Character Education", Character education Partnership. Accessed December 30, 2010 from <http://www.character.org/elevenprinciples>

¹⁰ Ohler, *Digital Community*, 203.

¹¹ Ohler, *Digital Community*, 215.

The final agenda item addresses the infrastructure required for digital citizenry and the key role played by IT departments. There is an interesting suggestion that each member of the IT department spend a half-hour in the classroom every week (remember this is an *ideal* school board).

The book is at its strongest when it makes connections between the special requirements of the digital citizen and the need for character education in the curriculum. A good case is made for the social importance of high character in the digital world. In addition, a strong case is made that character education, which has a strong tradition in US education tracing back to Washington and Jefferson, might be a key to opening up the narrowing of the curriculum brought about by No Child Left Behind and related policies. "The NCLB approach to schooling stands in stark contrast to other movement in education...such as 21st Century Learning Skills, which emphasized innovation, creativity, *citizenship*, and learning in a social context" ¹² (emphasis mine).

The reader may find the endless lists that Ohler compiles in this book a bit tiring, and his penchant for creating new words in the McLuhan tradition (e.g. Partycipation as a synonym for Web 2.0 tools) may tire some readers. But for a wide ranging and practical discussion of issues of digital citizenship appropriate for educators in particular, one would be hard pressed to find a better read.

¹² Ohler, *Digital Community*, 191.

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